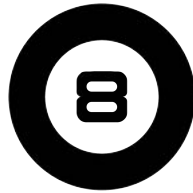


GOM20

GONZO CULTURE



**A REPORT ON CONTROL
PART 1**

A Note

The internet has broken our brains. This report answers why. We feel exhausted, confused, even frightened by changes in our world. But if one thing is certain, it's that the genie's out of the bottle and it's not going back in. Therefore, we face a choice. Accept reality will only get weirder and we will only get more confused. Or develop a new model for how the post-social media world works. To forecast the future, we have to analyze the present at a higher resolution.

Gonzo Culture is the inaugural issue of 8Ball, a Los Angeles-based trend consultancy founded by Sean Monahan (formerly of K-HOLE). It was completed over the course of 2019 and 2020 in Los Angeles, Upstate New York, and New York City.

This section is Part 1 of 2. It covers how brands and the internet intersect, the new vocabulary we need to explain digital phenomena, and strategies we can use to thrive in this new media ecosystem. Part 2 includes case studies, microtrends, and profiles of digital consumer tribes.



STANS AT THE GATES

N°1.1: AUDIENCE

FOR 48 HOURS IN OCTOBER

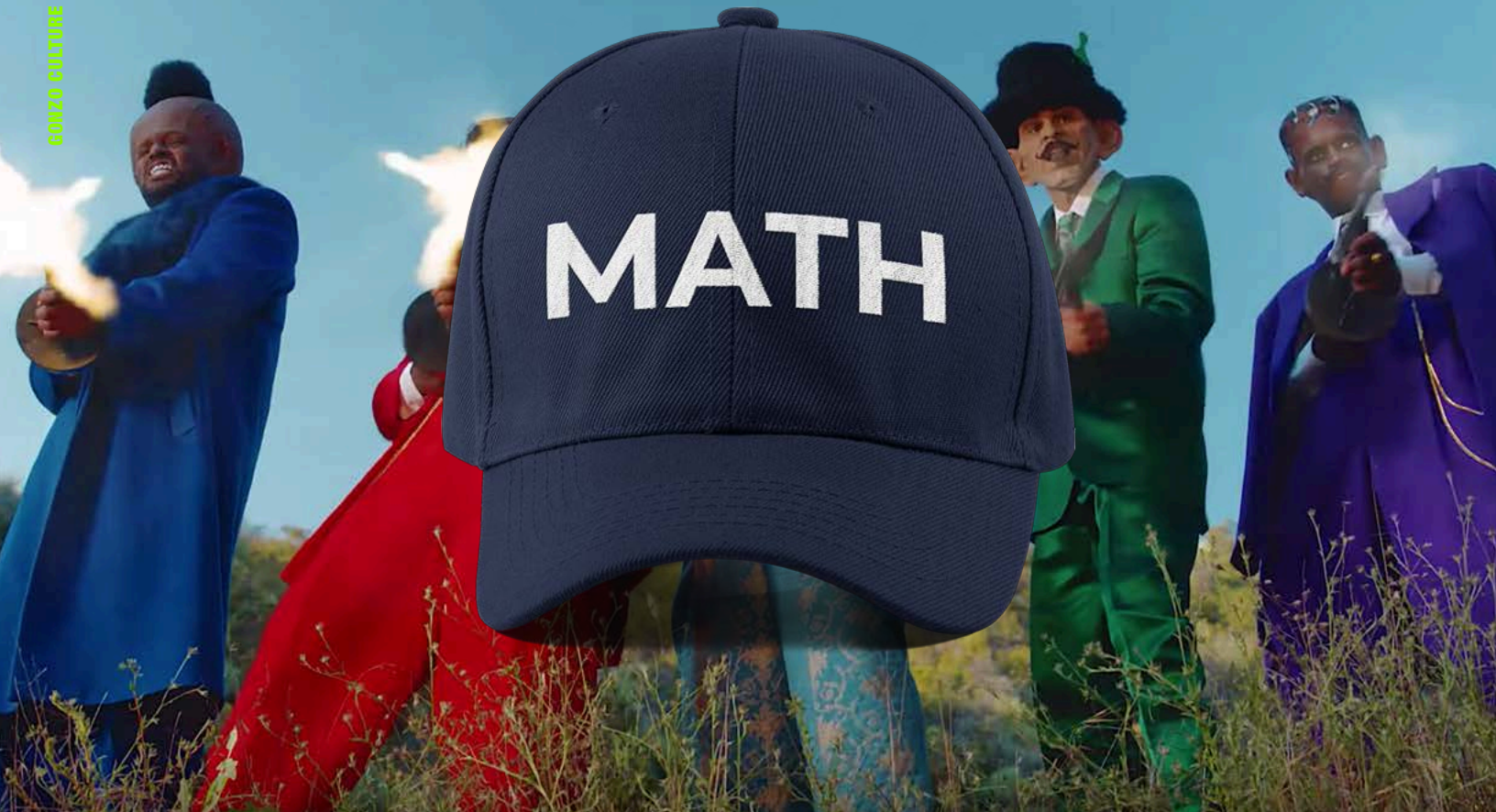
Jovan was back. The Twitter troll had been perma-banned by the platform after a high-profile flame war with beauty influencer, James Charles. Stans flooded the replies, legal threats were exchanged ("Let's do it baby, I know the law!"), and Twitter's Safety Team decided enough was enough.

Jovan and his Witnesses (as he branded his fans) had other plans however. The suspension instigated an indefinite game of Whack-a-mole. Each episode following a familiar trajectory: Jovan creates a new account, his followers return in droves (deca-thousands each day the handle remains active), before it's inevitably reported.



To say Jovan was canceled is to miss what's interesting about the dynamic. His profiles (there have been nine so far) are incidental to his audience. Streams can move to Twitch, DMs to Instagram, and the micropayments his most ardent supporters send supplying him with UberEats and weed, well his Venmo @ remains the same. The ban if anything only adds to his mythic arc: Tumblr teen turned Twitter gay turned uncancellable icon. He has seen platforms rise and fall.

This too shall pass.



In an era where brands think they're tribes—this is the sort of charisma they wish they had. After all, what is a tribe if not a group of people organized around a charismatic leader? MAGA Country has Donald Trump, the Democratic Socialists have Bernie, the Resistance has the Squad. When culture is fragmenting, the logic of find your people and hold them tight makes sense.

But brands aren't tribes. Individuals, not institutions hold magnetic appeal. No one cares that the Democrats rebranded, threw a Franklin Gothic D in a sky blue circle. Nobody has ever slapped that on a dadhat and proudly worn it to work. Meanwhile, our obsession with the iconography of challenger candidates persists. Yang Gang's vaporwave-pink nylon snapback predates the official campaign's MATH merch. And Balenciaga's Bernie Sanders logohack remains ubiquitous on caps and tees.

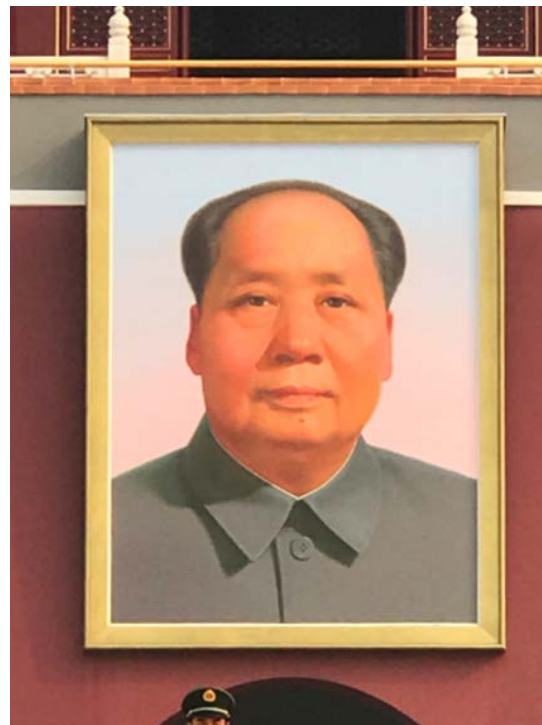


BRANDS ≠ TRIBES

Tribe is a defensive group formation. In politics, they crop up ready to do battle with the Establishment. (If all politics seem tribal in 2020, that's because everyone thinks the other side has the upper hand.) In culture, they coalesce whenever any aesthetic tries to circumvent the dreaded normie conformity of the Mainstream.

Like so much confusion in branding, the culprit here is Nike. When they launched their *Believe in Something* campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick in the fall of 2018, a firestorm of criticism rained down. Conservatives hosted sneaker barbecues. Boycotts were threatened. And progressives, sympathetic to Kaepernick's Black Lives Matter protest and still annoyed at the NFL for blacklisting him, flocked to stores, eager to defend him (and by proxy Nike).

But don't get it twisted. The sales were inspired by Kaepernick, not Nike. Like Jovan and Jesus, we stan a resurrected king. This is what culture powered by personality looks like—



THIS REPORT ANSWERS:

- 👉 What is the difference between a personality and a personal brand?
- 👉 How do brands fit into a new culture powered by personalities?
- 👉 Why are consumer tribes forming today?
- 👉 Are tribes personalities scaled?





SPEAKING IN BRANDS

N°1.2: PARTNERS



COLLABORATIONX



So where do brands fit if audiences are more interested in personalities than products? The most obvious answer is as a partner. As some of the last institutions still fetishized by the public, brands can act as arbiters. Hashtag ad validates regardless of if you have a blue check. But who really wins in the transaction is unclear.

Are brands speaking through personalities?
Or are personalities speaking in brands?

Brand partnerships are how personalities transubstantiate, rendering themselves as products, content, or simply social reality. When Kanye West evangelizes with his Jesus is King merch or Ed Sheeran creates Edchup through his Heinz deal, they invite their stans to prove their devotion.

Bear in mind though, the Sheerios aren't buying limited edition condiments because they plan to consume them. In the same way that a sneakerhead shrink-wraps neon beige Yeezys, utilitarian consumption is deferred in favor of product fetishization. The primary value is informational and therefore on a long enough timeline financial. (Think collectibles.)

The figure who has perfected speaking in brands is Virgil Abloh. He's the first—but certainly not the last—exemplar of truly informational fashion, where design is mostly a media signature. Quotation marks, Arial font, zip ties, industrial neon: alone, the detritus of the factory, the port, the container ship. Together, the unmistakable mark: “Virgil was here.”

Brands he founded (Off-White), directs (Louis Vuitton), and collaborates with (Nike, IKEA, Rimowa, et al.) serve as alibis that shore up Abloh’s own clout. His own personal brand remains fluid, applicable to any opportunity. As he claims, to make any brand yours, just tweak it 3%...





**TO BECOME
RELIGION...**



**TO BECOME
KETCHUP...**



If speaking in brands seems odd, it's because we've been trained to think of brands as being able to speak for themselves. A brand is a hive mind assembled from market forces, demographic research, conference culture quips, and that ever elusive spark of life, creativity. Brandvoice is our flimsy attempt to transform the flotsam of corporate operations into culture.

And yet when brandvoice manifests in reality, something is off. Should Colonel Sanders be DJing Ultra? Did anyone ask for Chester Cheetah to design a collection for New York Fashion Week? These initiatives have the same uncanny valley problems faced by influencers whose posts read like corporate press releases.

When something tries to be human, yet imperceptibly misses the mark, it gives us the heebie jeebies. Brands becoming people will always face Pod People problems and inspire the same reaction as sex dolls, military drones, and companion robots for the elderly.

The true issue brands face is that while people can be brands, brands cannot be people.



WELCOME TO THE CLOUTHOUSE

N°1.3: CLOUT

The original Clout House is a \$12.5M property in the Hollywood Hills. At four stories and 12,500 square feet; it boasts 10 bedrooms, 14 bathrooms, a pool, a waterfall, and a fire pit. The property is a monument to mall minimalism, made of glass, metal, and monochrome (excluding the inevitable LED lights). Its occupants are the Clout Gang, a social media collective made up of YouTubers, Twitch streamers, and other Internet personalities founded by gamer, FaZe Banks.

Somewhere between a fraternity, a production company, and a set from *The Real World*, the Clout House is optimized for a world where all the most relevant content is being created in bedrooms. Following this logic to its extreme, the house puts all those bedrooms in the same house. The term itself is in the process of genericiding: becoming a generic catch-all for predecessors like the Team 10 mansion as well as the inevitable copycats. (Collab house is to facial tissue as clouhouse is to kleenex.)

Clouthouses are emergent institutions that understand the biggest issue influencers face isn't access to equipment, but social proximity to talented and well-branded peers. Being everything is difficult when you operate independently. Who can be a friend, lover, producer, director, manager, agent, and marketer all at the same time? Why not delegate?



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In many ways, the enterprise works like tweetdecking: the now-banned practice of popular Twitter accounts forming cartels. Before Twitter outlawed the strategy—the Safety Team claimed it was “inauthentic” behavior—a deck would coordinate retweets to promote member content or sell engagement for hire. Tweetdeckers understood virality was a commodity and when multiple handles with high follower counts joined forces, they could almost guarantee trending content for their clients. Collaboration isn’t magic, it’s an alliance. Fame can be co-ordinated in the groupchat.

Clouthouses similarly perform double duty as both talent agents and studios. But unlike tweetdecks, transactions are all above board. Housemates sign multi-year contracts promising a percentage of future social media earnings to clouthouse investors in exchange for membership. Living in the house is just a perk. The real angle is mutual promotion, both of their roomies and paying sponsors.

Jake Paul calls Team 10 an 'incubator' for personal brands, though what it really incubates is relationships between them. As his business’ name suggests, brandcraft is a team-building exercise. Clout is promiscuous. In contemporary verbiage, we’d say poly. You can demonstrate desirability by taking as many partners as you please.

Clouthouses bring the partnership model so popular with brands to creators. Brand x brand, brand x personality, brand x event, brand x tribe, and perhaps most importantly, brand x consumer. Why not apply the same logic to internet personalities? The X factor was never about someone being special, it's was always about being connected with others. What better way to prove you have it, than by having friends?

No personal brand is an island.



UNFOLLOW



If we accept there's such a thing as a personal brand, then implicitly everyone has one. Some are just better executed than others. Being well-branded is like being well-bred. It's the "She speaks French" of the 21st century, implying a sophisticated understanding of both commerce and culture and the ability to navigate both effortlessly. Like all things in a meritocracy though personal brand, and the power that comes with it, is unevenly distributed. We call this uneven distribution clout.

Clout has always existed. It just used to be more discreet. We called it tastemaking and understood it's function in relationship to an institution. Graydon Carter had clout: a large network, trusted taste, proven influence, and a platform to demonstrate all of this called *Vanity Fair*. But tastemakers no longer need institutions to fulfill their cultural role.

When everyone has a platform, the institution is you.

Clout explains how the runway supermodel became the **INSTAGRAM MODEL** (i.e. a streetwear icon who lends her credibility to the runway, not the other way around.)

Clout explains how the record label pop star became the **SOUNDCLOUD RAPPER** (i.e. a memelord who can achieve virality greater than the label's paid distribution network.)

Clout explains how the staff reporter became the **PATREON PODCASTER** (i.e. a journalist whose personal brand explodes the gravitas of a traditional media outlet.)

Clout explains how the studio pornstar became the **ONLYFANS THOT** (i.e. a platform agnostic performer who understands the media is the marketing.)

Clout explains how the Fortune 500 CEO became the **SERIAL ENTREPRENEUR** (i.e. a business culture where creative leadership defines access to capital.)

Clout explains how the franchise fandoms became **STAN TWITTER** (i.e. an information ecosystem where content created by fans is at least as important as the canon.)



IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS MEDIA

N°1.4: BRAND

MASS, PERSONAL, & SCENE

In an August 2019 white paper, *To Brand or Not to Brand*, Ogilvy's Antonis Kocheilas argued brands have shifted from being symbols to stories to systems. This parallels the logic of our increasingly deconstructed media landscape, moving from print to broadcast to network culture within a lifetime. Brand is the expressive material of everyday life. Individuals are the primary medium through which they are conveyed.

In a post-gatekeeper culture, productive feedback loops are the most prized interactions. (Download our app! Join our network! Give me your data!) But while brand managers fret about delegating control to consumers, they ignore the fact that they never really had control in the first place and lose sight of a larger and more pressing cultural shift.

Broadcast culture prioritized two numbers: the one and the many. Audience was relatively unified, performers relatively rare. But in a culture where everyone has an audience and every audience is an overlapping fragment of the whole, we need to think in multiple scales.

Brand exists simultaneously at three levels: 1.) the legacy mass brand, known by virtually all; 2.) the de facto personal brand, our media signature, generated whether we like it or not by our online activity; and 3.) the scene brands, tribally oriented and culturally relevant. It's from the scene brands, the productive middle, where the most innovative ideas are being imagined today.





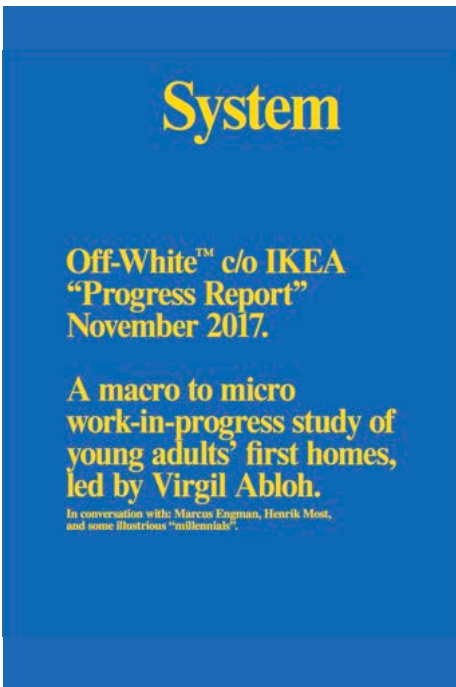
Take Pattern. The “consumer goods brand family” grew out of the creative agency Gin Lane, best know for their work with DTC darlings like Hims, Sweetgreen, and Everlane. Their stated intention is to tackle burnout and inspire Millennials to live better lives. Their first brand (they plan to release one each year) was Equal Parts. Launched last September and positioned as the anti-Seamless, it aspires not only to sell cookware, but also to teach their customers how to love cooking. After their first purchase, new customers are texted by a guide who helps them redefine their relationship to the kitchen. Pots and pans come with a life coach.

Located in the New York nook pejoratively called Dimes Square, after the trendy Chinatown restaurant decorated like a Memphis Group showroom, Pattern is clearly inspired as an antidote to the alienated app-enabled lifestyle Silicon Valley has subsidized throughout the 2010s. The **SCENE** of skaters, artists, and designers (Equal Parts employees and target audience) yearn for a life less marketed, inspiring the now viral BuzzFeed article that made burnout a **MEME**.

The piece touched a cord with the broader **TRIBE** of young urban professionals that have struggled to feel like fully-fledged adults and despite their ambivalent feelings towards technophilic Instagram brands, still see themselves as tasteful, design-forward consumers. The color blocked, sans serif, pastel **AESTHETIC** of Pattern reassures them that adulthood doesn’t need to be Boomer beige.







THE HYPE CYCLE



N°1.5: HYPE

LAST SUMMER IN LAS VEGAS

YouTubers Tana Mongeau and Jake Paul got married. The nuptials were filmed by MTV (Mongeau had a reality TV web series with the network) and live-streamed (for \$50) by the couple. In attendance were friends, family, other YouTubers and even an Oprah impersonator. Vows were exchanged at the Graffiti Mansion, a clouhouse frequently transformed by luxury brand activations and select street art crews and run by fellow vlogger, Armani Izadi. He officiated the ceremony. The reception was sponsored by the Sugar Factory and held at their Fashion Show Mall location on the Strip. BuzzFeed reported they left their party before 11PM in separate cars.

Rumors quickly circulated that the wedding was a hoax. The couple had only been dating for two months. Was this young love or a business partnership? It was the YouTube edition of Kim Kardashian and Kris Humphries' media blitz marriage in 2011. Would Paul and Mongeau outlast Kim's 72 day run with Kris? Best man Logan Paul seemed doubtful. After the ceremony, he told the press: "I give them a month or a month and a half."

When the MTV's *Tana Turns 21* aired on YouTube, skeptics of the marriage were vindicated. Paul and Mongeau talk about the wedding as a media object. They're doing it for the clout. No government recognizes the union. But as Tana's manager Jordan Worona says, it's legal under "YouTube law." Together Jana (Paul + Tana) have more than 25 million subscribers. Far more than MTV's six. What everyone witnessed, was the hype cycle in action.





Content → Stans → Charisma → Personal Brand

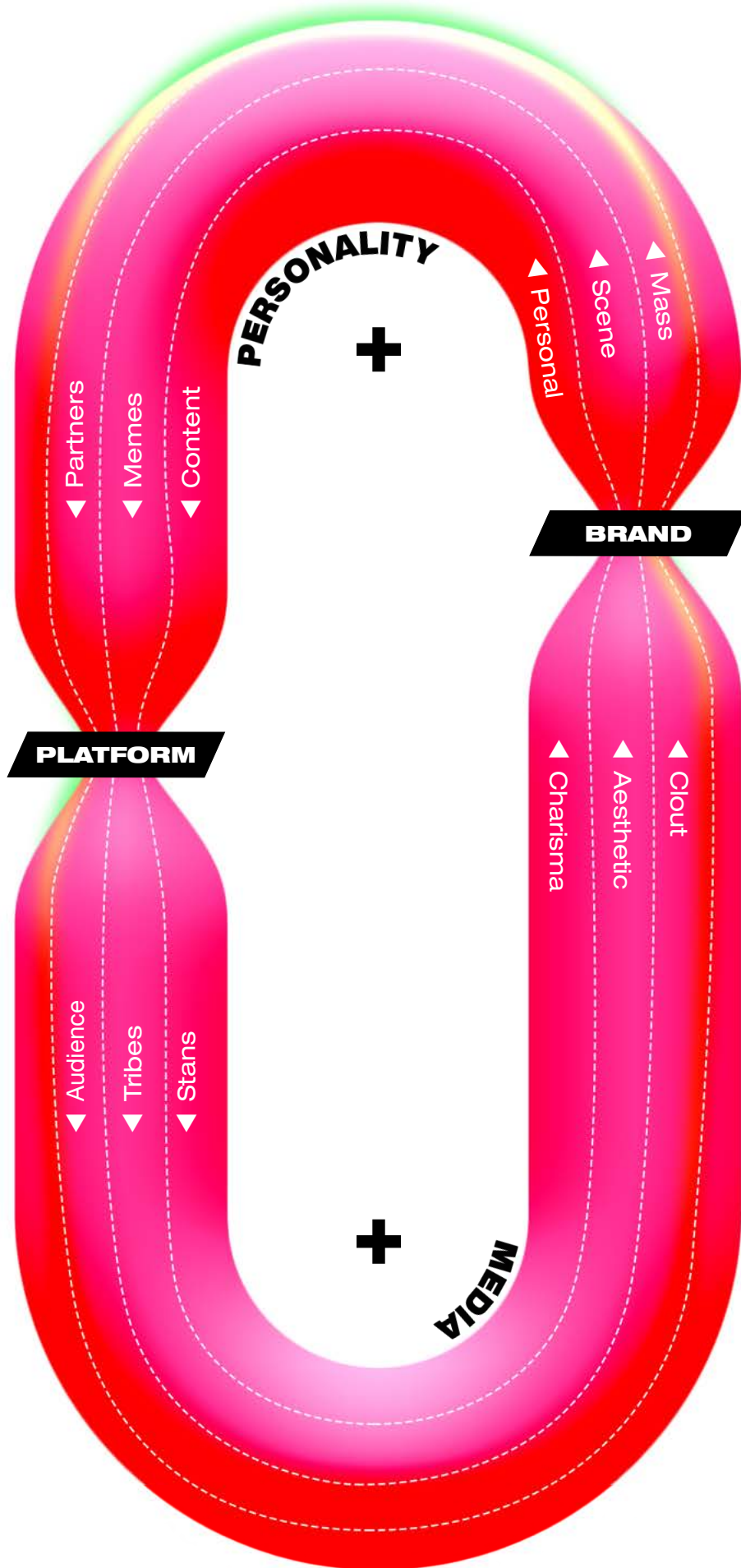
Tana Mongeau and Jake Paul began their careers on social media platforms, YouTube and Vine respectively. Their posts (**CONTENT**) attracted large, dedicated followings (**STANS**) that shared and promoted their work, becoming personally involved in Tana and Jake's success (**CHARISMA**), and establishing Tana as a relatable bad girl and Jake as a bro-ey prankster (**PERSONAL BRAND**).

Mememes → Tribes → Aesthetic → Scene Brands

As their popularity grew, their content became increasingly viral (**MEMES**). Jake Paul's antics in particular inspired a generation of clout-hungry bros (**TRIBE**) who emulated both his style—streetwear accessories with normcore basics—and his genre of content—prank videos (**AESTHETIC**). This led Paul to capitalize on his success by founding Team 10, an influencer incubator in Calabasas (**SCENE BRAND**).

Partners → Audience → Clout → Mass Brands

The Jana Wedding was a co-branded media spectacle (**PARTNERS**) that leveraged Jake, Tana, and MTV's huge cross-platform following to attract significant mainstream media attention (**AUDIENCE**). The partnership proved that Jake and Tana were celebrities in their own right (**CLOUT**) and that MTV understood the unique entertainment ecosystem of YouTube (**MASS BRAND**).



In *Tana Turns 21*, Mongeau complains no one understands her non-traditional (i.e. fake) wedding, though to her it makes perfect sense. If your best friend is your manager, why not marry a brand partner? “Our lives are also our businesses,” Tana insists. “We’re doing it for fun and for content.”

The social media story was supposed to be bottom-up clout defeating top-down fame, real life proving itself to be more interesting than the entertainment industrial complex. But the realest thing about the wedding was the trolling.

This leaves us to wonder: if it’s a prank when you trick your friend, a scam when you trick your audience, and a hoax when you trick the world, what do we call it when everyone is already in on the joke?

Recently, YouTube connoisseurs started complaining that the platform had changed, serving more branded content than in the past. In effect that reality TV was colonizing social media. But when we look up from our laptop screens, it’s clear that social isn’t the only thing that’s become more exaggerated, subjective, and spectacular. The world has, too.



Social media didn’t become more like reality TV.

Everyday life became more like reality TV.

GONE GONZO

N°1.6: TREND



It used to be possible to think of media as an escape from everyday life. Movie magic. Coffee with the morning paper. Snapshots in a shoe box. It's been so long since media was tactile and discrete that the memory is tinged with sepia and tastes like Werther's Original.

Media breaks down into three components: the creator, the content, and the audience. Between each, gatekeeping institutions guarded the necessary resources (money, access and time) to produce and distribute content. Or in layman's terms, connect creator to audience. Despite everything that's happened since the Golden Age of Athens, this model has changed very little—until now that is.

The fourth wall has fallen. What was once metaphor is now fact: "All the world's a stage." And we have become both the players and the audience. Social media has collapsed the distinction between life and art, commerce and creativity.

The world has gone gonzo.

GONZO WORLD

The ghost of Hunter S. Thompson is haunting America. Not **BECAUSE** we have another crook in the White House or **BECAUSE** activist countercultures are fashionable again or **BECAUSE** he'd probably get cancelled if he was alive... But **BECAUSE** the movement he founded has improbably become the source code for culture at large.

Gonzo began as a post-hippie perspective on journalism. Prioritize subjective truth over objective facts. Replace God's eye third-person with acid trip first-person. And above all participate. It understood the individual as a media object before the world was ready for it.

It's fitting that a journalist pioneered the code to today's culture. After all, the feed is the five o'clock news. Every post, every story, aggregating into a picture of the world today. It's important to note: this isn't an accident.

The you-are-the-product business model relies on converting daily life into media. It can only thrive if users believe in the power of self-expression to create change. **Thus, social was designed with gonzo conceits in mind.**



~~SOCIAL~~ VALUES

GONZO

SUBJECTIVE

The individual is the creator

EXAGGERATED

Our profiles are amplifications of ourselves

FICTIONALIZED

The internet is weirding reality







ACID TRIP FIRST PERSON

N°1.7: PERSONALITY

In the past, we had genius and celebrity. Were you toiling in the dark or posing for the flashbulbs? Were you writing songs or singing them? These concepts weren't mutually exclusive. An artist could be one, both, neither, or transition between the two. Thriller Michael Jackson—the King of Pop—was a celebrity. Neverland Ranch Michael Jackson was a genius...

Today we live in a culture of personality: subjective, exaggerated, and—arguably—fictionalized. It's not so much a question of whether you make media or perform media, so much as you become media. Personality isn't incompatible with genius and/or celebrity. Personality is their apotheosis.



The most advanced personalities live their lives like movie characters. Think Beyoncé filming every single second of her day. She understands the value of action. Her motivations are relatable, yet not so over-determined as to have lost all ability to surprise. Remember *Lemonade*?

Old school genius and celebrity still exist. Mary Kate Olsen designs the Row from her horse farm in France. Kristen Stewart still refuses to use Instagram. Withholding is chic, but only available to the mega-famous.



Celebrity: Aspiration as Content

Usually if people complain about everyone being obsessed with them, it means they have a personality disorder. With celebrities, the complaint isn't a delusion. It's just reality. The Famous for X formulation that Paris Hilton demolished was always a bit of a lie. Personifications of beauty, wealth, talent, admiration, and lifestyle, celebrities have always been famous for precisely one thing: having stuff we want.

Genius: Innovation as Content

Newness doesn't come easy, which is why we give geniuses so much slack. They aren't admired for who they are so much as for the things they make, and have a reputation for being difficult, demanding or just plain crazy. Lucky for us, genius doesn't need a stage. It just needs a distribution network. This lets us ignore personal failings and focus on 🔥 products.

Personality: Existence as Content

Personality is a muscle. To develop it, you have to use it. It's not as simple as establishing a brand or acting with purpose. It requires self-awareness and a sense of timing, activated by audience. If a comedian tells a joke in the woods, does anybody laugh? Only if he tweets it. Hence why social media has been such a boon to personality-based cultural production. Audience is anywhere with wifi.

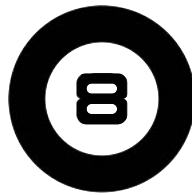




For Gonzo Culture Pt. 2,
[click here.](#)



**8Ball is a trend forecasting
consultancy founded by
Sean Monahan, formerly of
K-HOLE**



**LOS ANGELES,
NEW YORK, UPSTATE
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